



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

PAUL J. KNIERIM, JUDGE
Probate Court Administrator

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To: Senate Co-Chair Edith Prague
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House Co-Chair Peter Villano
Senate Ranking Member Joe Markley
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Honorable Members of the Human Services Sub-Committee

From: Paul J. Knierim
Probate Court Administrator

Re: Children's Trust Fund

Date: February 17, 2012

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding the Children's Trust Fund (CTF). Connecticut's probate courts have direct experience with CTF as a result of our partnership on two programs, the Kinship Fund and the Grandparents and Relative Respite Fund. Both programs are enormously valuable to the work of the probate courts in children's matters. The Governor's proposed budget would cut the Kinship Fund by \$425,000. The Office of the Probate Court Administrator urges the General Assembly to maintain full funding for this program in FY 2013.

The Kinship Fund and the Grandparents and Relatives Respite Fund programs are rooted in the principle that children whose parents are unable to care for them should be raised by another family member whenever possible. Ironically, grandparents and other family members appointed as guardians in the probate courts were ineligible for financial assistance before the establishment of these programs. Individuals serving as foster parents, on the other hand, receive considerable state subsidies. While grants from the Kinship and Respite Funds are modest in comparison to these subsidies, the grants play a critical role in helping relative guardians meet essential needs for children in their care.

The Kinship Fund provides annual grants in the maximum amount of \$500 per child, up to \$2,000 per family, that guardians may use for health care needs and for education and enrichment activities for children. Examples of the purposes for which grants are awarded include the purchase of eyeglasses, dental care, educational classes, art supplies, clothing, school uniforms, school trips, clubs, sports, summer camps, and vocational or trade school supplies.

The Kinship Fund grants are administered through the probate courts. To be eligible for a grant, a guardian must prove that he or she is indigent and not receiving any subsidy from the Department of Children and Families. The program is open to guardians appointed in any probate court or in the Superior Court. Guardians submit applications to any probate court, and a judge determines the amount and purpose for which funds are allowed.

In 2011, the probate courts were able to provide assistance to 1,246 families and 1,911 children with grants from the Kinship Fund. Sometimes, a modest amount of financial support represents the difference between a relative being able to care for a child and placement of that child in the foster care system. The grants often enable a struggling family to pay for something – a tutor to improve a student's math skills, piano lessons for an aspiring musician, a ticket to join classmates on a school trip -- that makes an enormous and lasting difference in the life of a child. I have attached some examples of the children and families that have benefited from these programs to illustrate the point.

We urge the subcommittee to reconsider the proposed cut to the Kinship Fund. The program is practical prevention tool that saves the state much more than the cost involved. The Kinship Fund enables children and their families to remain together, in their own communities, while avoiding the great expense and disruption of placement in the foster care system.

The Honorable Michael A. Albis
Administrative Judge – New Haven Regional Children's Probate District

The Honorable Michael R. Brandt
Judge – East Haven – North Haven Probate District

The Honorable Mark J. DeGennaro
Judge – West Haven Probate District

The Honorable Salvatore L. Diglio
Judge – Hamden - Bethany Probate District

The Honorable John A. Keyes
Judge – New Haven Probate District

The Honorable Robert K. Killian, Jr.
Judge - Hartford Probate District

The Honorable Jodi M. Thomas
Administrative Judge – Northeast Regional Children's Probate District

The Honorable Philip A. Wright, Jr.
Administrative Judge – Central Connecticut Regional Children's Probate District

Examples of Grants Kinship Fund Grandparents and Relatives Respite Fund

1. The guardian is a single grandfather and a veteran. His long-time job was outsourced and he now earns just slightly above the poverty guidelines, when social security is included. He received emergency custody of his three teenage grandsons, who were essentially wandering the streets with only the clothes on their backs. The boys have had a hard life. After moving them great distances several times and causing them to miss several years of school, the mother abandoned the children, leaving them with an abusive boyfriend. He sent the children to their biological father, whose significant other was an alcoholic and abusive to them. When their biological father was incarcerated, the stepmother kicked them out of the house. The cost of schooling, clothing and feeding these boys would not have been within the grandfather's reach without the kinship and respite fund grants. These boys are now thriving in a structured and loving environment and doing well in school.
2. An aunt was awarded temporary custody of two children from out-of-state. Four younger siblings remained in the care of the mother, several hours away. The aunt recognized the importance of maintaining regular sibling contact, but lacked funds to pay for the trip. Kinship and Respite funds were awarded to the family to assist with the cost of transportation and lodging so that supervised visitation with the siblings and the mother could be arranged.
3. A special needs toddler, who is hearing impaired and developmentally delayed, was in need of a therapeutic stroller to be transported to daycare, the park, and other activities. The child also attended a special education preschool and was learning sign language, but the guardian and her family did not know how to communicate with the child. A Kinship Fund grant helped the guardian with the cost of the stroller, and a grant from the Respite Fund was used to engage a sign language instructor to come to the home and teach the family how to communicate with the child.

4. The parents of a five year old child are both incarcerated and the grandmother was appointed guardian. A stray bullet went through the child's bedroom window, which was on the first floor of the home, narrowly missing the child. The grandmother received a Respite Fund grant for a security deposit for another apartment in a safer neighborhood.

5. A sixteen year old child resides with her grandmother, who was appointed as her guardian. The minor child is actively involved in the church choir, doing very well academically, and plans on attending college. The guardian needed financial assistance to send the child on a trip with the church choir to perform in Washington, D.C. and wanted to purchase a new computer to assist the child in completing school work. A grant from the Respite Fund provided the financial support for both of these needs.

6. An aunt has guardianship of a nine year old child. The minor child is seeing a therapist to assist in her recovery from trauma that occurred while living with the mother. The therapy was previously paid for by the mother's state insurance, but the child no longer qualifies because she is not in the mother's care. The guardian was able to use grants from the Kinship and Respite funds to offset the cost of the therapy and benefit the child by maintaining a consistent therapeutic relationship.